



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Contact: Teri Frady
(774)263-8711

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MARINE ANIMAL LIFELINE REMOVED FROM NATIONAL MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING NETWORK NOAA Concerned Sick Animals May Have Been Released

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) today terminated its authorization to Marine Animal Lifeline (MAL) to respond to stranded seals and provide rehabilitation in southern Maine. The agency said that the organization has violated several provisions of its authorization, and may have returned sick animals to the wild.

Approximately 20 seals are being moved from MAL's facility in Westbrook, Maine and sent elsewhere for care. Marine Animal Lifeline is a private, nonprofit organization that until today had NMFS authority to respond to stranded seals.

An ongoing NOAA investigation and subsequent site inspection found that MAL staff have not performed required health testing prior to releasing approximately 80 seals, potentially endangering released animals, other seals, and local wildlife. The agency is conducting further investigations to determine the extent of these and other suspected violations of MAL's agreement with the agency governing stranding response.

"We're taking this action to immediately reduce any risks to wildlife posed by continued operation of the MAL facility," said Patricia Kurkul, Northeast regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service.

Elevated numbers of dead and sick seals have been observed along the East Coast in recent months. To determine whether this is an indicator of a larger health problem in these populations, stranded seals have been subjected to additional screening for possible disease since June 2006.

A primary concern is the presence of *morbillivirus*, a pathogen known to cause a highly contagious distemper-like illness in seals. Outbreaks of the virus in European seal populations killed 18,000 seals in 1998 and 22,000 seals in 2002. NOAA Fisheries Service is funding the additional sampling. To date about 300 seals have been tested throughout the Northeast, and some have tested positive for the pathogen.

Responses to marine mammal strandings are conducted under the authority of NOAA Fisheries Service's National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Network. All organizations that respond to stranded marine mammals are partners in the Network.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving the nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management, and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

In 2007 NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. Starting with the establishment of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

The agency is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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For more on the National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Network

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/>

For more on unusual mortality events involving marine mammals:

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/>